

South Carolina Food Stamp and Well-Being Study: Well-Being Outcomes Among Food Stamp Leavers

1. Introduction

Food stamp caseloads in South Carolina and the rest of the nation fell sharply during the late 1990s. From 1996 to 2000, the average number of households receiving food stamps each month in South Carolina dropped 15 percent from 143,000 to 122,000. Nationally, the drop was even larger, 31 percent from 11.1 million households to 7.3 million (Cunyngham 2001). These enormous declines have been attributed to several factors, including favorable economic conditions, programmatic changes in food stamps and other assistance programs, and individual behavior (USDA 2001). The different reasons for the decline, in turn, have different implications for the well-being of those who left the program. Households that left voluntarily because of better economic opportunities or other personal reasons most likely improved their well-being, while households that were sanctioned off the program or left for other administrative and programmatic reasons may have suffered increased hardships.

Concerns about the well-being of food stamp leavers prompted the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to commission surveys of different groups of leavers in four states: Arizona, Illinois, Iowa and South Carolina. Evidence from the surveys indicated that hardships were common among leavers.¹ Jensen et al. (2002) reported that nearly half of the leaver households in Iowa were food insecure, and slightly more than half had turned to using private food assistance in the time since leaving the program. Mills and Kornfeld (2001) and Richardson et al. (2003) similarly reported that just over half of the households that they surveyed in Arizona and South Carolina, respectively, experienced food insecurity after leaving the Food Stamp Program. In contrast, Rangarajan and Gleason (2001) reported that only one-quarter of leaver households in Illinois were food insecure but that three-fifths had experienced at least one severe hardship two years after exiting the program. The incidence of food insecurity reported by Jensen et al. (2002), Mills and Kornfeld (2001) and Richardson et al. (2003) is nearly identical to the national incidence of food insecurity among food stamp recipients around this time of 52 percent (Nord et al. 2002), while the figure reported by Rangarajan and Gleason (2001) is comparable to the national incidence for low-income non-recipients.

Our study looks closely at the survey information from South Carolina to examine characteristics of leaver households that are associated with three domains of well-being: food hardships, other adverse events and subjective assessments of life changes since leaving food stamps. The survey that we examine interviewed leaver families who had children and who had not participated in the TANF program while on food stamps. Unlike the studies listed above,

¹ Dagata (2002) summarizes results from this research.

This study was conducted by The George Washington University and the South Carolina Department of Social Services under a cooperative agreement with the Economic Research Service. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of ERS or USDA.

which provide general figures and some cross-tabulations of well-being outcomes, we conduct detailed multivariate analyses of these outcomes.

Each of the domains of well-being in the South Carolina survey is measured by several questions. Following the practice of most previous studies in this area, we examine summary measures, such as indicators for whether any adverse events occurred and counts of the number of events that occurred. However, because of the limitations of some of these measures, we also develop and estimate Multiple Indicator, Multiple Cause (MIMIC) models of the outcomes. The specifications for these models incorporate a measurement model that relates the responses from the relevant questions to an underlying index of well-being; they also incorporate a multivariate behavioral model that describes how a set of explanatory variables affects the index. MIMIC specifications have been used in numerous other contexts; however, to our knowledge they have not been widely used in food assistance research.

The rest of this report is organized as follows. The survey that we examine and variables that we drew for our empirical analyses are discussed in Section 2. In Section 3, we report results from cross-tabulations of how well-being outcomes varied across households with different economic and demographic characteristics. In Section 4, we describe our multivariate statistical models, including the MIMIC models, and report results from these models. Discussion and conclusions follow in Section 5.